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Bridging the Indigenous Gulf:
Thule, Greenland, and Australia

by Peter Jull

The debate over suitable indigenous recognition in a future preamble to the Australian Constitution is a classic study in bridging (or not bridging) gulfs between indigenous and non-indigenous realities.

On the one hand are the pleasant words and apparent movement in ideas represented by the government's revised draft preamble of August 11, 1999. The relevant words now say that 'We the Australian people commit ourselves to this Constitution' while 'honouring Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the nation's first people, for their deep kinship with their lands and for their ancient and continuing cultures which enrich the life of our country', this among other official sentiments cited.

The entire new draft is a great relief to most literate people after the first draft of March 23. The issue of the use or non-use of the word 'custodianship' to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander roles eludes many in its significance. After all, isn't it good enough now to have some positive sentiments?

But of course, positive sentiment is not the issue for many indigenous people. They heard fine words and public self-congratulation at the 1967 referendum to amend the Constitution's race power. One distinguished Australian politician of long standing said to me that she felt that we were back to c. 1970 again, promising compassion. Transcendental sentiments deliver little, except public smugness and a false sense that things are on the mend.

The government says that it is concentrating on basic indigenous needs. The basic needs would take a lot of concentration – and some serious funding. Norway fixed up its poor indigenous and non-indigenous northern outports and hinterlands in a generation, but that sort of Nordic political will has not been seen in Anglophone countries except episodically in New Zealand and parts of the Canadian North.

As Lowitja O'Donoghue, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) chair, said in what may be the most important indigenous policy commentary of the decade, on February 11, 1996, the Australian federal government's indigenous policy was 'to throw money at problems it scarcely believed can be resolved'.

Meanwhile the depth of need provides governments a cheap alternative to serious action. Promises of a few gewgaws, a little playground equipment here and a bit of money for some favoured project there, and many needy people can be made to think they are receiving the most generous treatment they can 'realistically' expect under present circumstances.

Bridging official realities and indigenous needs taxes even the most progressive countries and governments. In August 1999 a Danish higher court found that the Inuit of far north-western Greenland had been moved from their traditional village to make way for the great Thule Air Base. (That US base housed hydrogen bombs secretly till some were inconveniently lost in a B-52 bomber crash one day, bringing down the Danish government in 1968.) Days after this court decision the Prime Minister has flown to Greenland, met with locals and the Inuit premier, and apologised – in Danish and Inuktitut, the Greenlandic Inuit language – and made arrangements for allocating remedies to the 53 survivors directly affected. Other remedial measures, new facilities, etc. are already in train.

In 1987 there was another political crisis over Thule, bringing down Greenland's coalition government. The issue then was not only the 1953 actions which had seen Danes or American or both neglect promises to Inuit bundled up and moved away from their ancestral village. The new factor was US upgrading of the BMEWS (ballistic missile early warning system) radar. Was it merely a new system doing old tasks, as the US military argued, or a step up in nuclear war-fighting capability as even some American experts argued? Those final days of the Cold War were very hot in the Arctic, and debate on US aims spread anxiety across the North Atlantic.

Mary Simon, the Canadian Inuit president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), i.e., the international association of Inuit, had long been asked by the Polar Inuit of the Thule region to visit and hear their concerns. As her assistant I suggested that she wait till the Greenland election was out of the way, but she felt she had to go now for several practical reasons, and she took me along.

The morning we flew out of Ottawa the newspapers carried extensive coverage of the 'Brundtland report' of the World Commission on Environment and Development. By the time we arrived in Greenland's capital, Nuuk, Mary was ready to talk about the importance for Inuit and the world of Brundtland's central theme of 'sustainable development'. Greenland's own political autonomy (since 1979) and national spirit were a socio-environmental reply to the industrialisation and global market economy with which Europe was impinging on this huge ice-covered Arctic island, so her message was welcomed.

We later flew with two cabinet ministers from the now-opposed parties, united however in their commitment to Inuit internationalism. One, Hans-Pavia Rosing, was ICC president before Mary, and the other, Aqqaluk Lynge, has been president since. Flying into the far north then required USAF clearance and acceptance on the flight. After some problems which could have proven politically explosive in the electoral context, we were on our way, journalists in tow, in a USAF transport.

After hanging over the cliffs and blinding ice cap in spring sunshine in helicopter bubbles onward from the base to Qaanaaq, the northernmost municipality in the world, we were met and escorted into 'town' by the mayor in polar bear skin pants and most of the local children. This world of blinding white with the sun wheeling about overhead 24 hours high in the sky seemed far removed from the high-tech of the base which had once been the last word in futuristic planning with its under-ice

facilities, etc. (Some maps confuse the names, but the US Thule air base or 'Dundas' is at 76'30" North, and Qaanaaq, or 'Thule' on some maps, 77'30"North.)

At Qaanaaq boats lay on the snow-covered shore, the sea mammals being hunted by dog sled in winter. Wearing polar bear skin pants for warmth we went 20 km out to an island of polar bear hunters to hear pleas for help with a Canadian government newly enforcing the international boundary (in a vast region without inhabitants! *[i.e., the region of central Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Islands in Canada]*) in the middle of their ancient hunting grounds. With the Qaanaaq shop shut in my face I became snow-blind in one eye for lack of sunglasses, but the dog-sled trip across the sea ice was worth it. After meeting in the one-room school we had thermos bottles of hot tea, raw frozen whale meat, and fresh Danish pastries from Qaanaaq for sustenance. Inuit girls wore jackets embroidered with their names which revealed them to be grand- and great-grand-daughters of famous polar explorers.

In Qaanaaq we had long hearing-style meetings and got the story of the sudden 1953 forced relocation of people. We learned that Inuit particularly resent the foreigners at the base 'playing' on hunting grounds now denied them, a reference to an annual golf game on 'Dundas Mountain', Uummannaq to the Greenlanders (not to be confused with Uummannaq town and mountain at 70'40" North). This was shown us in photos by the base commander as a good morale boost for cooped-up white staff, played on the amazing crême caramel-shaped mountain which sits in the sea and on whose isthmus to the mainland the pre-1953 Inuit village had long huddled.

The Polar Inuit had a defined homeland hemmed in by ice and rock, a territory which sustained all their needs. Then one day a big chunk of it was taken out for the base and security zone while their population has steadily increased. Nevertheless, despite comfortable little modern houses, Danish pastries, and modern rifles, the Qaanaaq lifestyle remains traditional. The Polar Inuit and their villages regularly turn up in *National Geographic* as symbols of indigenous survival. (For scholarly treatment of Polar Inuit realities old and new the books and articles of Jens Brøsted, Mads Fægteborg, Rolf Gilberg. and Jean Malaurie are recommended.)

Inuit who had helped with the clean-up of the B-52 crash reported symptoms typical of radiation problems. Rumours abounded about the secrets of the base and its environs, and the plutonium never recovered from the crash. The base itself is full of jokey good humour about being farthest north and coldest this or that. The shop had a line of greeting cards which caught my eye: they dealt with every imaginable relationship dysfunction, and some I'd never thought of, to send back to that special someone in Michigan. The base staff were intelligent and friendly – *Dr Strangelove's* mad air crews had given way to neat personnel with MSc degrees in computer science.

Idly picking up the same day's *New York Times,* flown into the base daily, we discovered that Canada had leaked through the USA the news that it would buy nuclear submarines for Arctic patrol, this ahead of a major defence policy statement. The Canadian permanent secretary of defence was quoted saying this advance notice was so that 'the Indians and Eskimos' would have time to get used to the idea of new military activity (and, unsaid, not to spoil the policy reception with their protests).

The policy was big news in Canada for a few weeks and then quietly forgotten as the costs of submarines and end of the Cold War sank in.

Our various warring emotions and impressions were still being sorted when we flew into Kangerlussuaq, or Søndre Strømfjord, another US base now turned over to civilian use as the main Greenland airport. Media and political life caught up with us and we were whipsawed by denunciations and defences. Mary's careful comments in English to the press were often translated into rather more florid Danish. What awed me, however, was the Inuit public: Mary had the cachet of a virtual spiritual, political, and moral leader, above the fray, the representative of world Inuit, and they would not hear her criticised.

We flew into Danish spring, the first green, the most beautiful time of the year, and what I knew would be my last northern hemisphere spring for a very long time. Eating outdoors at Tivoli people would come up and take Mary to meet their dinner guests, e.g., former prime ministers, or just their own children.

On this trip the most isolated indigenous hunters, the big-time politics of war and peace, and establishment respectability had all converged, and I was moved to have been there. Back in Canada we got more criticism, often from official sources, but there was renewed public and media interest in Arctic indigenous-white and international cooperation. The 'empty' Arctic was now a place which was showing the world what environmental 'good citizenship' was all about.

Soon Mary would spearhead Inuit, Arctic, and Canadian environmental politics in the world, and then be named Canada's first Arctic ambassador. She keeps that title now as she takes up her new post as ambassador to Denmark in late 1999.

Indigenous-white relations are not something finished or wrapped up by a declaration or document. They are a continuing story, an evolving dialogue. Governments do not 'sign off' on the agenda. They become a normal part of the life of countries and the world. They become part of our nature and reality – for all of us.

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